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State Fire Marshal Announces Arson Awareness Week
May 1-7, 2005 – School Arson – A Burning Subject

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan and State Police Det. Lt. Martin Foley, Commander, Fire and Explosion Investigation Section, have teamed up with the United States Fire Administration (USFA) and the International Association of Arson Investigators (IAAI) to promote arson awareness. May 1-7, 2005 has been designated National Arson Awareness Week, and this year's goal is to make Americans' aware of the problem of school arson and to engage the public in joining the fight to prevent it.

"Prevention and awareness are the key factors in mitigating school fires," according to USFA Administrator R. David Paulison. "With today's tight budget constraints, communities and schools do not need to be spending valuable and diminishing resources on cleaning up and repairing the damage created by these fires," said Coan.

The Costs

In 2003, there were 49 intentionally set, or arson, school fires reported to the Massachusetts Fire Incident Reporting System (MFIRS). These 49 arsons accounted for 20% of all the reported school fires in 2003. They also caused an estimated \$40,151 in damages. Another 10, or 4%, of school fires were reported as juvenile-set fires.

Confined Indoor Rubbish Fires

The largest category of reported school fires was indoor rubbish fires confined to their non-combustible container. There were 81 of these confined rubbish fires, accounting for one-third (33%) of all the reported school fires in 2003. It is most likely that many if not all of these fires were intentionally set but because they are confined to a non-combustible container an abbreviated report was used that does not ascertain if it was intentionally set.

Most School Fires Occur When School is in Session During Lunch

School fires in Massachusetts generally occur during the school day. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the school structure fires in 2003 occurred during the hours between 8:00 a.m. and

1:00 p.m. with a sharp increase between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. Ninety-two percent (92%) of these fires occurred between Monday and Friday. It seems likely that many of the intentionally set and indoor rubbish fires were set by the students themselves.

Proposal to Require Reporting of All School Fires

Fire officials have filed a bill requiring school officials to report all fires to the local fire department, even those that are quickly contained by staff. "Fire investigators often discover that there have been a number of so-called 'small fires' prior to the one that finally called them to the school," said Det. Lt. Foley. "The sooner we know about a school fire, no matter how small or easily extinguished, the sooner we can connect a juvenile with the help he or she obviously needs. School officials don't do children in trouble any favors by not reporting fires."

Arson Hotline 1-800-682-9229 – Helps Communities Fight Back

If you know or suspect that an arson crime has been committed, or is going to occur, contact your local fire or police department, or call the statewide, toll-free Arson Hotline 24-hours a day at 1-800-682-9229. The Arson Hotline is part of the Arson Watch Reward Program, funded by the property and casualty insurance companies in Massachusetts. This program has been used effectively by state and local fire investigators since the early 1980s to garner information from the community to solve the crime of arson.

Marshal Coan and Det. Lt. Foley would like the public to be involved in protecting their own neighborhoods by reporting suspicious activities, protecting buildings from becoming arson targets and by participating in neighborhood watch programs.

- ◆ If you know or suspect that an arson crime has been committed, or is going to occur, contact your local fire or police department, or call the statewide, toll-free Arson Hotline 24-hours a day at 1-800-682-9229. All calls are confidential.
- ◆ Report suspicious activity and abandoned motor vehicles to police.
- ◆ Report unsecured vacant buildings to building officials.
- ◆ Remove things that can burn from building exteriors that arsonists could use to ignite a fire such as debris, trash, leaves, and firewood. Most arsonists use whatever is handy to start a fire.
- ◆ Prevent unauthorized access to buildings.
- ◆ Secure building windows and doors and outside dumpsters.

Reporting All Fires Leads to Prevention

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan encourages residents to "**report all fires** to the local fire department, regardless of their size." Investigation to find the origin and cause of a fire determines why the fire started and who, if anyone, is responsible. In this way accidental fire causes can be identified and actions taken to reduce similar fires from occurring. If the fire is declared to be intentionally set, law enforcement officials conduct a criminal investigation.

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